

THE JOY OF GIVING THANKS AND PRAISE

Text: “Be filled with the spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5: 19-20

Up until September 16, 1990, this congregation used the 1955 Presbyterian Hymnbook—the maroon one. But over the years, new hymns were written and a new hymnal was created. Our Worship Team at the time suggested the purchase of the new blue hymnals. It was approved to purchase them, and the official subtitle of the hymnal was adapted from our passage today: “Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs.” Mary Ann created an “Adopt a Hymnal” program so for any hymnal a family purchased for the church, a dedication could be placed inside the front cover, and they could take home one of the old maroon hymnals! There was no budget impact to make that change! Hymnals often come with accompanying annotations that tell the history behind hymns. Today I want to walk you down a hymnology memory lane, indicating the power of hymns and telling the backstory behind a number of them. Our own elder and Choir Note writer, Anne Nussle, gave me this idea as she put her article in this month’s newsletter describing a hymn that Norton and I sang on July 18: “Here I Am Lord.” Some of the words to the hymn include these: “I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry. All who dwell in dark and sin, my hand will save. I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright, who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?” Anne then discovered this insight from research in *Songfacts*: Dan Schutte recalled writing the song.... [He said:] “Somehow I was led to those stories of the call of the prophets: Jeremiah, Samuel, and Isaiah in the Old Testament. A major inspiration was the passage in Jeremiah I where the prophet expresses his self-doubt to God about his calling.” Over the course of two days of writing the hymn, Schutte changed the words from a confident: “Here I am Lord, here I stand, Lord”

to a more hesitant “Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?” It sets up a very personal ...dialogue between God and us.” So in making that one change, our own feelings of inadequacy about being called to do something as a Christian gets validated. How powerful! What about “Our God Our Help In Ages Past? In *The Stories of Hymns We Love* published by John Rudin and Company, we are reminded of “Isaac Watts who lived in England almost two hundred years after Martin Luther’s time....Watts had the special talent needed for his important work as hymn writer. In his day, only Psalms were allowed to be sung in the strictly Reformed Church... To Watts and a few other leaders, it was evident that new life had to be given to sung worship. “O God our Help in Ages Past” was published in 1719 and is one of his most stalwart hymns rich with images. Watts is memorialized in Westminster Abbey. By the way, I am still using the book *Stories of Hymns We Love* as a reference. It was published in 1934 and belonged to my great-grandmother, Mrs. A.E Conner. It was handed down to me!

Over the years children and youth of the church have named some of their favorite hymns. A new one in the blue hymnal was “Earth and All Stars” which was certainly a praise hymn! We sing it the first Sunday when we return to Sunday School. That hymn was written in 1964 as an exuberant piece for the 90th anniversary of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Hymnals that contain psalms hymns, and spiritual songs are memory books.

But a hymnal is also a treasure of scripture. Many hymns in our purple hymnal were carried over from the blue hymnal. But not the special music our group sang today. That was originally a hymn, but it was not included by the editors of the purple hymnal. It has magnificent words, sung to a tune called *Jerusalem*, composed by C. Hubert Parry, and the words are a paraphrase of Psalm 145: 1-13. The hymns I’ve mentioned so far point to the prophets, to the words of Paul, and of

course to the glory of God. St. Francis of Assisi is credited with writing an early version of the Hymn *All Creatures of My God and King*. “In Francis’ last days he became virtually blind and unable to endure daylight. The first woman to follow his call—Sister Clare—built him a small reading hut in the garden of her convent where he could live out the rest of his days.... It is said that Francis could be heard preaching to the birds, urging *them* to praise God!... It was at a meal with the sisters that she wrote the text *Canticle of the Sun* ... later paraphrased into the beloved hymn we sing today.”[anglicancompass.com] Then a hymn we often sing on Maundy Thursday or during Lent is *My Faith Looks Up to Thee*. It has been said that [it] is by far the most precious contribution that American genius has yet made to the hymnody of the Christian Church.” [John Rudin and Company, p. 29] “The Lyric which has won high praise came from the pen of a young man only twenty-two years of age”—Ray Palmer—in 1830, of Little Compton, Rhode Island.” [Rudin, p. 29-30] What timeless words from someone that age, words like: “While life’s dark maze I tread, and griefs around me spread, be thou my guide. Bid darkness turn to day, wipe sorrow’s tears away. Nor let me never stray from thee aside.” Stunning theology and carefully selected words. One of the earliest German hymnals had a fifteen word title meaning “Several Christian Songs, Hymns, and Psalms, According to the Pure Word of God, from Holy Scripture.” That hymnal, published in Nuremberg in 1524, contained—are you ready for this?—a grand total of eight hymns! How hymnals have changed! Hymnals that contain psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are truly handbooks of theology—some great theology, some poor theology, but because words are set to music, they are remembered and cherished. Hymnals, alongside of our Bibles, also confess our own faith. When we sing from them or read from them, we consider what we believe. And music is the key ingredient that helps us remember the messages. How many of us can recite our A,B,Cs by singing them in our heads? I

can repeat the Nicene Creed by memory only if I sing it in my head! My children's choir director had us learn it and sing it in church. I have never forgotten it.

Let me leave you with this today. Paul apparently felt so strongly about the phrase he used with the Ephesians that he used it with the Colossians too! Listen to Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God." *That's what we are to do as we gather to praise and sing: to teach the faith; to recall the faith; and the pass on the faith to others.* Finally, one of the greatest hymns of praise to God is our last hymn today: "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." "The text was written by Henry Van Dyke in 1907 while he was guest preacher at Williams College, in the Berkshires, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Tertius Van Dyke told the story that his father 'came down to the table one morning and placed the manuscript on the table before President James Garfield, saying, "Here is a hymn for you. Your mountains were my inspiration. It must be sung to the music of Beethoven's 'Hymn to Joy.' It was first published in *The Poems of Henry Van Dyke (1911)* and included in *The Hymnal (1933.) [Presbyterian Hymnal Companion, LindaJo H. McKim, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993]* Some hymnal committees take out Beethoven's original syncopation before the last stanza, but the last two Presbyterian hymnal committees have left it in. Don't get tripped up by it! That's that way Beethoven wanted it presented! So, read Scripture; learn Scripture. And "sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in your hearts to God." And as Paul declared in Colossians 3:14: "Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." So may it be.

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